The Visual Space of War

Bringing the War Home
Impressions Gallery

Matthew Brady's American Civil War photographs are a common point of origin for any discussion of the pictorial representation of war. In 1862, New York Times editorial noted that Brady’s images were so powerful it was almost as if he had brought bodies and laid them on our doorstep and along the streets.”

This is the epigraph to the excellent essay framing the exhibition, “Bringing the War Home,” an exhibition of nine photographic projects curated by Peppe Olidello for the Impressions Gallery in Bradford. Supported by a reference from Martha Rodger’s collection from the Vietnam era, the exhibition poses a double question: how can photographs function as relics, transmitting information to us from afar, and as echoes of affect, emotional vehicles such that the information is said to “hit home”?

Brady is an especially significant starting point for this discussion. While he is regarded as the documentarian of the American Civil War, Brady was a photographer who did not take many photographs. As Mary Furner demonstrated in her 1997-98 exhibition, “Brady’s Portraits: Imager as History,” the best known photographs of the dead at Antietam were made by Brady’s assistants, Alexander Gardner and Timothy O’Sullivan. Indeed, Brady ran a large studio that was in effect a commercial brand, employing numerous props in the contemporary craft of image manipulation to create portraits and landscapes that gave their sitters added gravitas. That this constructed imagery with its complex authorship could become the visual record of an event as significant as the American Civil War tells us much about how we might read photography.

Photography’s distinction has always been that it has a connection to the world outside imagination even as it explores imaginary representations. This is anything but straightforward, because the world is not an unproblematic reality and the connection is not that of an amputated copy. As a technology of visualization photography constructs, and representation is unavoidable. But there is still some force to the notion of “indexicality” even as we problematize the notion of the index. The event and the world may not be a secure foundation for truth, but they still offer limits on lies.

The nine visual projects that “Bringing the War Home” presents are attuned to this problem, as each in its own way foregrounds the space between the event and the image. None of the exhibits offer a conventional war photography and none of them offer “true” pictures of death or destruction. In the two works that came closest to familiar news images—Christopher Morris, “War in Iraq” (2005-06), and South Africa’s Sipho Sithole’s “20/20 Portraits” (2006) – the photographs are openly constructed, Sithole’s black and white portraits, in which he presents himself as the subject marked by scars and wounds, are the only examples of personal imagery.

Although a number viewers thought they conceived real moments of conflict, Sithole’s pictures detailed the imaginary Afrikaans and Israeli villages, complete with actors playing residents, that the UN military had built for conduct training as part of its “human terrain” program, in which social scientists had provided the military with cultural training in order to increase its effectiveness in dealing with civilians from a foreign culture. The difficulty is drawing the line between the real and the imaginary was further enhanced by the fact that Sithole’s found himself playing a photomontage in the simulation. But his coup de grace is the photograph of an imaginary building upon which American military constructors have placed the infamous image of Abu Ghraib from the hooded man standing on the box. It would be hard to imagine a more complex layering of representations. Sithole’s photographs recall Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin’s “Chicago project,” which pictured the fake Arab villages and Israeli military training. In “Bringing the War Home,” Broomberg and Chanarin contributed one of the prints produced during their trip to Afghanistan. From their series “The Day Nobody Died,” “The Repatriation,” June 15, 2006, is a tonal photograph of a回味 one of the events. The six metre image of a fake photographic paper revealed the sun from the back of an Army vehicle, a production process that mimics the embedding of images in contemporary wars, with the indelible meaning of the image anchored by the accompanying video that recorded how this photographic paper was transported around Afghanistan.

Each of the other projects, all of them compelling – Farzad Farhan’s embroidered portraits, the video from Peter van Agtmaal’s “2nd Tour Hope I Don’t Die,” Lisa Barnard’s “Blue Star Moms and Care Packages,” Edmund Clark’s “Letters to Oscar,” Kay May’s “The Easter Pan,” and Saif Al Mohammed’s “Stories from Kadim – warrants a detailed discussion that space does not permit. Together they make an important statement in response to our times.

Our current global context is one of permanent war, an ongoing state of emergency and frequent humanitarian crises. This has produced a condition in which the “humbled” is something that surrounds us at all times. We now find ourselves located within – not just the “military-industrial-media entertainment network (MIME-NET),” thoughtfully produced and carefully curated, as in “Bringing the War Home,” photography can still offer a critical response to these powerful social forces.

David Campbell